

Political scene heats up in 1896

By Elin Christianson
Hobart Historical Society

Although political campaigns were mercifully shorter one hundred years ago, Hobart citizens faced no fewer than three separate elections in 1896: two local elections and a county, state, and national election.

In January Hobart voters turned out to approved bonding for the first gravel road in the county. The road ran 11.2 miles, from the southwest corner of Hobart to Miller. (At that time Hobart Township extended north to Lake Michigan). The road was completed by the end of the year and provided plenty of local jobs, grubbing out obstacles, filling and grading, and hauling gravel. Several entrepreneurial citizens invested in teams of horses and wagons, hoping to recoup their money working on the road. The cost was \$36,990.

Local elections for the town board, town clerk and marshal, were held every year in May with candidates chosen by caucus in April. Candidates apparently did not run on party tickets; a single caucus nominated candidates, and the top vote-getters won the office. The town board, informally known as the town dads, voted into office included Seward Lightner and two incumbents, George Stocker and Dr. P.P. Gordon. C.O. Johnston was re-elected town clerk and O.W. Carlson, marshal. The town board also appointed its first town attorney, J.H. Conroy.

Angered by some of the actions of the board, local attorney Louis Wettenberg later charged that the 1895 and 1896 election certificates had not been filed and called for another election to declare the town corpora-

tion invalid with Hobart reverting to township governance. The town board thwarted Wettenberg's effort by filing the proper papers in Crown Point.

County, state and national campaigns for the November election did not get underway until mid-summer, on the county level, Dr. R.C. Mackey of Hobart was returned to office as county coroner. William Rifenburg successfully campaigned for state representative. Rifenburg, born in New York state, was one of Hobart's first settlers, moving to Hobart in 1856. In 1861 he had volunteered for the 9th Regiment, Indiana Volunteers, and fought with in the regiment the Civil War until he was wounded at Shiloh. Returning to Hobart, Rifenburg had become one of the prominent businessmen of the town and active in civic and church affairs. He served in both the 1897 and 1899 legislatures, sessions being held only every other year in those days.

The national election pitted William McKinley against William Jennings Bryan. The free silver/gold debate raged in Hobart as it did across the nation. The **Gazette** reprinted a good part of Bryan's famous "Cross of Gold" speech at the Democratic convention. Hobart citizens organized public debates on the question, and both Republicans and Democrats split locally into gold and silver factions. With no radio or television to broadcast political messages, local groups played a much more active part in the national campaign.

While Bryan and his supporters traveled the country to appear at meetings and rallies, McKinley made all of his campaign speeches from his front porch in Canton, Ohio. The railroads offered special excursion fares to Canton, and in later October, 44 Hobart men took advantage of a Nickel Plate excursion to Canton to meet McKinley. After hearing McKinley speak and shaking his hand, one of the Hobart men stepped behind McKinley's house and picked a cabbage head from the garden. After the Hobart delegation's return, the souvenir cabbage was exhibited at Wood and Mackey's drugstore for all Hobart to see. Hobart was solidly Republican in those

days and apparently solidly gold. McKinley carried Hobart with 326 votes. Bryan garnered 159 votes while the People's (Populist) candidate won three votes and the Prohibition candidate, six.

Civic Progress

With the new gravel road in the works, the Town Board proposed installing a sewer line along Main Street before it was graveled, the cost to be borne by the town's general fund. Their seeming benevolence in relieving property owners from assessment was revealed to be self-interest when Louis Wettenberg pointed out that the town dads were the major property owners on Main Street. In the end, Main Street property owners were assessed shares for the sewer line as well as for brick gutters and crosswalks to complement the new road.

Another major improvement was replacement of the wooden bridge over Deep River on Third Street with an iron bridge with limestone abutments. Township Trustee N.P. Banks supervised the construction of a new school in district 7 on the south side of Hobart. The low bid for construction of the brick schoolhouse was \$1,320. This school, now remodeled and added to for a residence, still stands on South Lake Park Avenue.

The most notable business event of the year was the opening of Stommel & Scheidt in the Union block (Third and Center streets). This general merchandise emporium carried

a full line of groceries, dry goods, boots and shoes, hats, and furnishings and offered to take produce as well as cash in exchange for their merchandise. Stommel's would become a local fixture for over 60 years and its long-time manager, Carl Krausse, a legendary character.

Up, Up and Away

Finally, the following item in the June 26, 1896 **Gazette** hinted of even more progress in the future.

"The citizen's of Miller's (Miller was then also known as Miller's Station) and vicinity were somewhat worked up over the appearance of O. Chanute and party who arrived there on Monday and were conveyed to the lake beach. Much mystery surrounds their actions but from the appearance of fixtures taken there with them and from what could be surmised it is expected the party is arranging for a series of experiments with a flying machine or airship of a new design."

A big thank-you

The **Gazette** expresses its thanks to Elin Christianson and the Hobart Historical Society for the stories and photos that made this section possible. We hope you enjoyed this brief look at Hobart's past.

By-gone prices tough to beat

Sometimes those nostalgic good old days were not really so good. The prices were certainly hard to beat, though.

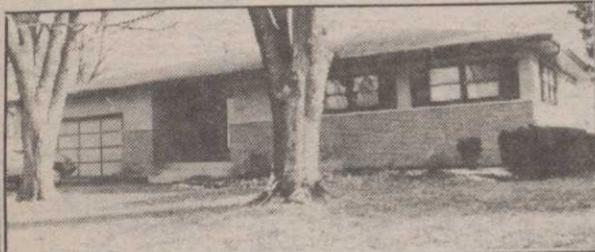
In 1896, one hundred years ago, J.J. Wood, proprietor of Hobart's Central Store advertised these items: coffee, 22¢ a pound; 25 pounds of oatmeal for 25¢; a can of peas, 10¢; a can of corn, 7¢; a can of salmon, 25¢; six boxes of sardines, 25¢; and a pound of soda crackers for 5¢. Lowenstein's in Valparaiso offered a gallon of maple syrup for \$1.00, Carolina rice at 5¢ a pound, and a gallon of pears at 20¢.

Prices 50 years ago, in 1946, don't look so bad either. The A&P in Hobart offered whitefish for 35¢ a pound; Spry shortening at 3 pounds for 70¢; frankfurter rolls at 8 for 11¢, and peanut butter at 29¢ for a six ounce jar. Kroger's advertising stewing chicken for 41¢ a pound, hamburger at 25¢ a pound, or sirloin steak for 41¢ a pound. Spotlight coffee was 59¢ for three pounds; Durkee's margarine, 22¢ a pound, and cigarettes, 2 packs for 27¢ or \$1.31 for a carton.

Those were the good old days--pricewise, anyway.

--Hobart Historical Society

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